

# The men

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# SPECIAL ISSUE

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**Leo: Clorwn on the Conb**

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**Cas: BONE MAN**

**Shanti: 3.5e Players**

**Isaiah: Jimmy Buffet**

**Ida: Corrupt Student Governments**

**Julianna: Bean Circle (Mandatory)**

**Front Cover: Chris Sommer**

**Back Cover: Chris Sommer**

Submissions are due always, constantly, so submit forever. You can submit in any format (no PDFs please) by CD, Flash Drive, singing telegram, carrier pigeon, paper airplane, Fed-Ex, Pony Express, or email. Get your submissions to [omen@hampshire.edu](mailto:omen@hampshire.edu), the Omen Office, Leo's mailbox (1593), or Jay's mailbox (0370).

# Policy

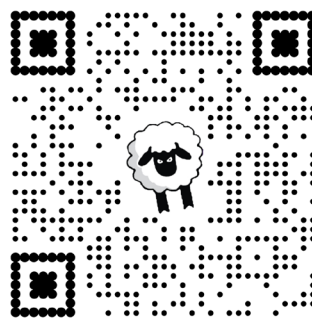
The Omen is a bimonthly publication that is the world's only example of the consistent application of a straightforward policy: we publish all signed submissions from members of the Hampshire community that are not libelous. Send us your impassioned yet poorly-thought-out rants, self-insertion fan fiction, MS Paint comics, and whiny emo poetry: we'll publish it all, and we're happy to do it. The Omen is about giving you a voice, no matter how little you deserve it. Since its founding in December of 1992 by Stephanie Cole, the Omen has hardly ever missed an issue, making it Hampshire's longest-running publication.

Your Omen submission (you're submitting right now, right?) might not be edited, and we can't promise any spellchecking either, so any horrendous mistakes are your fault, not ours. We do promise not to insert comical spelling mistakes in submissions to make you look foolish.

Your submission must include the name you use around campus: an open forum comes with a responsibility to take ownership of your views. (Note: Views expressed in the Omen do not necessarily reflect the views of the Omen editor, the Omen staff, or anyone, anywhere, living or dead.)

The Omen staff consists of whoever shows up for Omen layout, which usually takes place on alternate Thursday nights in the basement of Merrill in the company of a computer with an extremely inadequate monitor. You should come. We don't bite. You can find the Omen on other Thursdays in Saga, the post office, online at <http://expelallo.men>, and just about any other place we can find to put it.

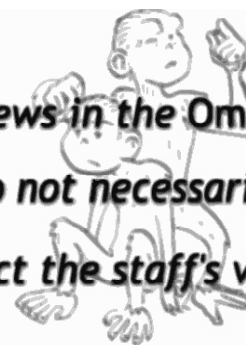
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**Views in the Omen (5)**

**Do not necessarily (7)**

**Reflect the staff's views (5)**



# *DEATHFEST RETURNS*

MARCH 26

1:00PM

Join us, and DIE:)

## EDITORIAL

# \*TWO GUNS COCK\*

by Leo Zhang and Jay Poggi

11 years ago, Hampshire College held its 8th Deathfest. As was tradition, many participants recounted their experiences in real time via Twitter. “Someone just challenged the earth to a gundam fight,” observed @Madzteir. “Just made a living suit out of Trotsky’s body,” bragged @IhatepplScrooge. At the end of the night, a wearily triumphant @invictuz\_rara asserted, “going to SAGA for a #deathfest victory waffle. No one else is invited.”

The roleplaying fools of Hampshire held Deathfests until they didn’t anymore. Now, a new band of fools comes together to cast “True Resurrection” and turn this dead tradition into an undead one.

We know what you might be thinking: “What was that bit about a Trotsky-suit??” To that we say, Deathfest is a rules-light, d20-based, tabletop roleplaying bloodsport where (basically) everyone dies. That’s sort of the point. Most RPGs star valiant heroes fighting for fame, fortune, or hamfisted philosophy, but not Deathfest. In Deathfest, you might be a cool swordsperson, but you’re just as, if not more likely to be a shitty rat, or a can of beans, or—\*BANG\*

Hey guys, Leo here to take over the editorial! You may also be wondering, “Who exactly is in this ‘band of fools,’ and how did they get to the point of reviving Deathfest?” Well, sit down, and we can tell you the tale.

It all started with Ida Kao, as most things tend to do. At the time, she was in her first year at Hampshire, probably confused as fuck about a lot of things, as most first year Hampshire students tend to be. Looking through Omen back issues (of her own free will—let it sink in) was the first time she ever encountered the word, the tradition, the concept: “#deathfest.”

That was it; the seed had been planted. So when she later saw Hampshire alumni on Twitter talking about the mysterious #deathfest, she obviously took notice. Because she’s Ida Kao, and she’s got a solid +15 to noticing stuff.

“So sad it died,” they would lament, or something. “Would love to do an alum one.” Stuff like that.

Then came the fateful day. While in conversation with alum Ethan Ludwin-Peery (F09), the topic of the fabled Deathfest came to the surface. It was over the course of this conversation that Ida realized that tabletop RPGs were popular on Hampshire’s campus—like, really popular—and Ethan figured, hey, wouldn’t it be cool to reintroduce Deathfest to the fresh blood? Ethan suggested creating a writeup about the tradition, to Ida’s exuberant, uncontrollable giddiness, and on April 3rd, 2021, he, FST (F10), and Alex V (F10) got to work.

At the time of writing this editorial, that was about ten months ago. So what happened in regards to Deathfest in those ten months while the alums were working on a guidebook to reviving Deathfest? Don't worry, Ida didn't just sit on her ass and twiddle her thumbs about it. Actually, it was quite the opposite. Once the F21 semester started, she took on the responsibility of doing all the work no one else would: grabbing anyone and everyone whose path she crossed, staring them down, and demanding to know if they liked DnD. If the approached person did, in fact, like DnD (and frankly, even if they didn't), they would leave the interaction knowing about Deathfest. It was probably because of this Ida-brand persistence that she connected with Shanti Franzoni (F21) to talk about reviving Deathfest. Shanti wanted to restart the RPG club, Making Myths Living Legends (and they did!), so—\*BANG\*

What's up gamers, it's Jay. We're sure you're itching to get to the actual meat of this RPG Rulebook shaped hog, but stay your fork and knife for just a tad longer as we thank some monumental individuals. First, thank you to Ethan, FST, and Alex V for writing the extensive guide contained within these pages, and thank you doubly to Ethan for funding its printing. Your combined generosity ensures that Hampshire's dice fiends will be able to send their beloved characters to a potpourri of unceremonious dooms for countless generations. Thank you to Shanti, Alix, and all who have agreed to help MMLL enact the incantation of undeath and return the ancient game to life. Finally, thank you to Ida for assembling this group of would-be necromancers, for your relentless dedication to the cause of Deathfest, and for being the certified best in general. Anyway, without further—\*BANG\*

## **CAN'T CLICK LINKS ON PAPER?**



**READ THIS ISSUE  
ONLINE**



# SECTION DEATH

by Ethan Ludwin-Peery F09, FST F10, & Alex V F10

## Back from the Deathfest

Deathfest was Hampshire College's once-a-semester roleplaying tournament that ran from 2000 until some time around 2017. "Deathfest is a simplified-D20 RPG," wrote FST in 2013, "so a little bit like D&D's goofy younger brother, where instead of fighting kobolds as an elf mage, you might fight a giant squid as a sentient pot of coffee."

The first Deathfest was run in 2000, but the tradition has roots even further back in the murky past. Before Deathfest there was an annual [Ravenloft](#) tournament (its name currently lost), possibly started on Halloween 1991 (which would make it about the same age as the authors).

The exact roots remain something of a mystery, and accounts differ on the details. A "Deathfest Bible" compiled by a couple Deathfest DMs around 2013 says:

Deathfest began as the Hampshire Autumn Chess Tournament in 1971. Things escalated quickly through the 70s and early 80s with the introduction of the parallel poker tournament and all-school dungeon crawl, which swept the rest away in the mid-80s to bring about the Deathfest we know today.

A [2009 post from Baka-TV.com](#) ("The News is Always Wrong") on the occasion of Deathfest Spring 2009, says:

Deathfest was originally called Ravenloft back at Halloween 1991. It started off with just 15 people in the Dakin House basement and they invited anyone who was interested to come and play. It is a RPG tournament that uses a simplified D&D system. Back then, Ravenloft had 3 dungeon masters and now, Deathfest on Spring '09 had 13 dungeon masters. And what they do is split the rat pack of adventurers into groups for a game. This year, they split us into 9 groups and each game had a theme.

Erin Snyder, one of the three original Deathfest DMs, had this to say about the origins of the tournament:

Before I went to Hampshire, there was a Ravenloft tournament, but it was defunct by the time I got there. Deathfest started as an attempt to revive it and kind of grew into its own thing.

There were three DM's (myself, Dan Neff, and Joe Laycock). I think there were between 30 and 40 players the first time we held it, maybe a few more. We held three or four while I was at Hampshire, so we definitely didn't manage one every semester.

We didn't really have themes aside from whatever premise we threw together (i.e.: vampire lord attacking a village, standard dungeon crawl, journey to hell, etc.). I know they got way more creative over time after I graduated.

Also, the best voice mail I ever got in my life was from the head of Public Safety doing a routine call for events asking if we needed security at "Deathfest 2000." I remember he paused before saying the name of

the event, as if he was sure he was misreading it. I'll never forgive myself for failing to keep that recording. "I'm just calling to see if you need any security at... Deathfest 2000."

In any case, Deathfest grew from its humble possibly-in-a-basement beginnings to become a major Hampshire College nerd culture staple. In time, Deathfest came to take over every room, hall, and tunnel of [Franklin Patterson Hall](#) (except for the weird, suspended western wing).

At some point people must have decided that one Deathfest per year was just not enough. By the time we got there, there was one Deathfest per semester: a fall Deathfest, and a spring Deathfest, every year. Double your death, double your fun.

At its height around 2009-2014, Deathfest regularly drew about 200 people every semester. Here are some photos of what Deathfest looked like back in the golden age:

Traditionally Deathfest was funded and hosted through the now-defunct student group Excalibur. Based on the activity on [this facebook group](#), Deathfest itself seems to have run up to 2017. Now it too is a nearly-lost tradition.

There was a Deathfest banner at one point. The banner was stolen before Deathfest 2011, I can't remember if we ever got it back.

At one point there were [t-shirts](#), designed by Chris Sommer. Many of us still have them! All three of us have run Deathfest at one point in our careers. We had a lot of fun, and so did the hundreds of students, alums, friends, etc. that we entertained and killed. We think it is too bad that this tradition has disappeared. So in this piece, we are recording all the trade secrets YOU need to revive it.

Deathfest materials that would be helpful in reviving the tradition — including schedules, audition materials, characters, posters, emails, templates, and much much more — can be found in the **DEATHFEST TIME CAPSULE** at [tinyurl.com/h6fhafj6](https://tinyurl.com/h6fhafj6). In case that short URL ever goes kaput, the original long-ass URL is: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/109mFb\\_P8UNBJiBC\\_CfKHxAmowRIjJpux](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/109mFb_P8UNBJiBC_CfKHxAmowRIjJpux)

## So You're Going to Revive Deathfest

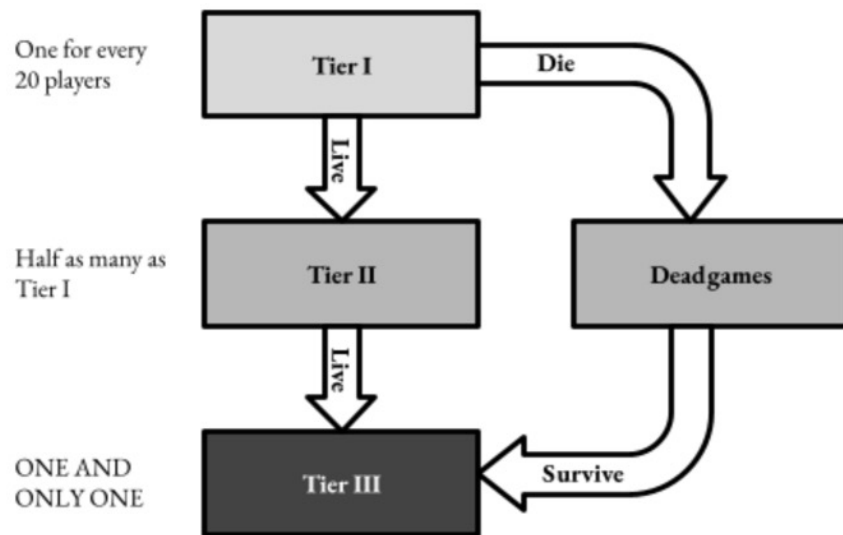
### Basic Play Mechanics

Deathfest is a “last one standing” elimination tournament, with gameplay based loosely on “standard” D20 systems, like GURPS or Dungeons and Dragons. That means on their turn a player will state what they're attempting to do, roll a D20 to find out if they did it, add relevant modifiers based on character stats, and, if relevant, roll a smaller die to find out what they broke (or how broke they are). The details will be explained more in the creating characters and running Deathfest sections, but the goal is always for play to be fast paced, accessible to all kinds of players, and creative. Big decisions and bold characters are usually more fun than subtle or careful play styles — this has generally been RPG as comedy more than RPG as tragedy. With that said, players will play however they want, and having a range of play styles can help make for a lively game.

Deathfest is structured around a big picture plot, more on which in the theme section, and individual DMs contribute stories that fit into that world. The DM, or “Dungeon Master” (Or GM, for Game Master), is

responsible for the main scenario of each game, for scene painting, introducing dilemmas and challenges, and collaborating with players to find out what happens as the players try to solve those problems. The DM will talk the most, but Deathfest at its best is collaborative — the players can and will surprise you, and it's good to let those surprises guide the story. The DM also provides characters for the players who start in their “Tier.”

Deathfest consisted of three tiers or rounds of games, each tier being between 1 and 2 hours long. The first tier introduces the story and the last tier is the climax.



Character death, unlike in D&D, is frequent and essential to Deathfest. Characters who die in Tier I have a second ‘chance’ in a deadgame, but characters should be played with the understanding that they are fragile, fungible, and more fun to play recklessly. Rewarding big choices helps speed up the game, while rewarding ‘careful’ behavior will slow it down. Characters should die, and players should have a good time when they do — even with their own death.

## Community Norms

Deathfest is structured around violence the same way a Looney Tunes cartoon is. In general, we have distinguished between violence that’s “fun” and violence that’s violent. This is going to vary based on players and DMs expectations and experiences, but as a rule of thumb, over the top rather than visceral, and limited to murder/maiming rather than interpersonal violence or psychological harm.

**FST’s note:** We had a whole discussion about this my last year DM’ing, because we’d had a traditional warm up chant that went “we’re going to rape, kill, pillage and burn, we’re gonna rape kill pillage and burn eat the babies” and so on. We realized that while killing, pillaging, burning, and especially eating babies were still funny to us, rape wasn’t. We opted to agree to insta-kill players who attempted to have their characters sexually assault either other player characters or NPCs, which was a new rule, and to include a trigger warning statement in the opening spiel/powerpoint explaining the level of violence attendees should expect. DMs will want to decide as a group what community norms and “funny” violence look like for themselves, but this is a change compared with the somewhat



freewheeling approach to different kinds of violence including joking about sexual violence which marked the first Deathfests in which I was a player. We did still have characters eat babies.

**ELP's note:** I believe we opted to modify the chant to go, “We’re going to BAKE, kill, pillage and burn”, which is much more in the spirit of Deathfest as a violent farce.

## Building a Team

Recruiting the right Deathfest DMs is critical for running a great Deathfest.

In general, you need at least one DM for every 20 people at Deathfest, because in Tier I, each DM starts out responsible for 20 players. Usually you will have a few more than that, since the Tier III DM(s) usually don’t run a Tier I, and often you want a wandering DM or two to walk around and check in on everyone every once in a while. These are usually Deadgame DMs in Tier I, and the Tier III DM(s) in Tier II.

**FST's note:** This was when Deathfest would pull in just shy of 200 people. In a smaller Hampshire, with less community and five-college awareness of the game, you may wish to do things differently — find numbers that are manageable for your GMS but allow for in-game chaos.

If you find that you have more players than you can handle, or a DM gets sick / incapacitated / brain worms, there is a long tradition of alum DMs filling in, and most of them would be more than happy to help out.

(For related reasons, we recommend all DMs steer clear of seafood for the 48 hours preceding Deathfest.)

## Recruitment

Traditionally, at least during the time we were DMing, new DMs were selected by audition. Auditionees were given a theme prompt and free reign to come up with a mini-game and set of characters using the Deathfest system. Current and retiring DMs would take turns playing in games vs observing others, and would share notes. Generally we had a ranked choice voting process, I think? Anyway, you’ll need to decide how to make decisions, but an “audition tier” generally worked well. To support folks who might not have DMing experience, we did provide a written “rule set” at some points.

When playing in an audition tier, there are a couple questions you can pay attention to. Does the prospective DM make sure to give everyone a turn? Do they build off of player ideas rather than shutting them down? How do they handle unexpected actions? And finally, do they make it fun to die?

## Choosing a Theme

The Deathfest theme is applied loosely as a narrative framing device, and is most critical for Tier III. The theme can be as general or as specific as you would like, but should give the players a reason to go on a “quest” (or get dragged on one) to get to Tier III — this could be as simple as chasing a MacGuffin or as complicated as saving the world. Tier I and II should fit within the “universe” of the theme, but DMs have discretion on the theme of their own tier.

For example, in a time-travel-themed Deathfest, the players were told they wanted to fix a time machine. In Tier I, players were scattered throughout time and space, in Tier II survivors were ‘time warped’ into a new era, and in Tier III, the antagonist fought the finalists over their time machine.

Every year the theme of Deathfest is a closely-guarded secret. But every year, you have to say that the theme is Mole People. “It’s actually going to be Mole People this time,” you say. “We’ve really run out of ideas.” The theme is never actually Mole People. Do not do Mole People ironically. IT IS NEVER MOLE PEOPLE. Except this year guys, this year it is totally mole people.

When FST & ELP ran Deathfest in Spring 2013, the theme was BUSINESS. In Fall 2013, Alex Vercoutere presided over a high school themed Deathfest, with a prom Tier III. Different tiers were themed around different classes, with deadgames for players who died in Tier I as “detention” or “skipping class.”

## Creating Characters

Making characters was always the pulling-teeth part of running Deathfest, because DMs pre-make characters for all 20-30 possible players in their Tier I, and it could be hard to make that many characters every semester. When you revive Deathfest, make sure you stay on top of character creation.

Players are assigned characters at semi-random, usually by leading questions like “who would like to get cooking” or “who here thinks they can beat Bobby Flay” to get a chef-type character. Another approach was to write suggestive keywords related to each character on the whiteboard and let players pick a keyword that sounded interesting.

Characters should have a “hook” which encourages a creative playstyle — for example, theming abilities and items around a profession, an activity, or a relationship. Sometimes we thought of this as a “want” — what kind of thing does the character “want,” and how can we support that want through building attacks and special abilities? If a character has a clear want, it’s easier for a player to jump right into playing in pursuit of that want — or, if they don’t like it, they can create their own. These can be fairly abstract, like “I want to be famous” or they can be very specific, like “I want to cook every monster I see.” They can involve other players, generally or specifically, like “I want to find a new mom” or “I want to protect my wife.” Wants can be anything, and you can support them by coming up with abilities that suggest routes to get the want, like a chef character with a cooking ability, or a lonely child character with a “lovability bonus” — or a painful, crushing hug. Don’t get too attached to your version of the character, but do try to make a character that you would want to play.

Be careful of wants that are too easily met. A character who wants a glass of water is pretty funny, but it’s not funny when they get a glass of water 15 minutes into Deathfest and no longer have any identity. Wants that are ongoing (“I want to give people bad advice”; “I want to eat people”) or functionally impossible (“I want to destroy all shoes”; “I want to kiss every frog in the universe”) are better.

Abilities can have “real world” requirements, like speaking in rhyme or doing simple motions, like clapping hands or, with permission, touching another player (holding hands, etc.) These can make abilities more fun or create a more inviting tier environment, but should be used cautiously.

Do not give characters abilities that encourage the player to sing. DO NOT give characters abilities that encourage the player to jump around, stand on the table, etc. This is a safety hazard. (Ethan’s note: To my eternal shame, I once gave a character an ability that encouraged the player to stand on the table and sing every turn, so that’s what

he did. Do not be like me.)

The other critical aspect of character design is agency. The character should want something, and they should have the ability to pursue that want. It's a given that most characters in Deathfest will die, but players will still have fun as long as they have agency. When you're designing abilities, design abilities that allow players to be creative, express themselves, and influence the arc of Deathfest, without stepping on other players' ability to do the same.

## Stat Block

Deathfest is based on a simple d20 system. If you've played D&D or another d20 game, then you know roughly what we mean, but let's take a minute to spell it out.

The basic idea of a d20 system is that whenever a character wants to do something that involves any challenge — eating a sandwich is not a challenge (unless it's VERY big), but throwing a sandwich at your math teacher is — they roll a twenty-sided die (d20) and their success or failure is determined by how high the roll is. If you roll a 19 or a 20 you have almost certainly succeeded. If you roll a 1 or 2 you have almost certainly failed.

If you roll somewhere in between, then it depends. Whatever you are trying to do, the DM should determine the difficulty class (“DC”) of the check, probably a number between 2 and 19. Low numbers mean the thing is easy to accomplish, high numbers mean the thing is hard to accomplish. You might only have to roll an 11 to hit your sluggish math teacher with a sandwich, but it might take a roll of 17 to hit your spritely gym teacher. If you roll equal to or higher than the DC, you do whatever you were trying to do. If you roll lower, you fail.

Usually you are not just rolling a d20, though, because most rolls are affected by modifiers. Modifiers can come from anywhere. The DM can give modifiers (“The puffy coat you found gives you a +2 on all rolls to not get frozen!”), modifiers can come from your abilities (“You get a +1 to all rolls when attacking birds.”), or from anywhere else. But most of the time modifiers come from a character's attributes, from a character's saves, or from a character's attacks.

Every character has six attributes. Each attribute has a modifier which is applied to any roll related to that ability — you add or subtract the relevant modifier to the roll.

**Strength** modifies rolls that involve raw physical power.

**Dexterity** modifies rolls that involve quickness and coordination.

**Constitution** modifies rolls that involve toughness and resilience.

**Intelligence** modifies rolls that involve thinking and problem-solving.

**Wisdom** modifies rolls that involve perception and common sense.

**Charisma** modifies rolls that involve social skills and force of personality.

If you roll a 15 on an attempt to make a friend, and have a -1 charisma, you add the modifier to your roll and get a 14, etc. If you want to game the system, you could instead lift a car off a kitten with your +3 strength to impress someone, and potentially make friends without having to use your charisma stat — if you can talk the DM into it.

Modifiers generally range from -1 to +3. Every character should have some good attributes (+2 or +3) and at least one bad attribute (-1 or +0). The rest should usually be +1's.

At one point we asked that all attribute modifiers add up to 7. Normally this would look something like +3 +2 +2 +1 +0 -1 (total: +7), but it also allows DMs to get wacky with the arithmetic — a -5 in charisma and a +10 in strength, for example, as long as all six modifiers add up to +7.

The idea here is you can build a “glass cannon” which auto-fails all rolls in one area and auto-wins in another. This can be fun! But it does set up situations to “break” the game, so you should only do so if you know you can plan around players’ auto-win and auto-lose rolls, so it doesn’t get too easy or too discouraging. The same principle applies to the modifiers we discuss below. Like most of character building, you’re trying to set your players up to make big choices, so outlining what their character can and can’t do by nudging their stats in one direction can help — classic examples would be a wizard who has high intelligence and low wisdom, or a circus strongman with high charisma and strength but low dexterity and intelligence.

Each character has three saves. These are special modifiers to be used reactively in response to different kinds of danger, to get out of sticky situations. The DM or the relevant ability will tell you what kind of save to use and how high you need to roll to avoid danger. If you roll high enough you avoid whatever it was and come out fine. If you roll below you suffer the consequences. Add your relevant modifiers after you roll.

**Fortitude saves** are the save equivalent to constitution. If you need to resist a poison or disease, hold your breath, or keep your lunch down, the DM might call for a fortitude save.

**Reflex saves** are the save equivalent to dexterity. If you need to react to danger quickly, get out of the way, or catch something coming in fast, the DM might call for a reflex save.

**Will saves** are the save equivalent to wisdom. If you need to engage in a battle of raw mental power, resist getting hypnotized or magically entranced, or try to avoid the lure of one more cup of coffee, the DM might call for a will save.

Save modifiers usually range from +0 to +4. A common combination is one save having +4 and the other two having +2, but you can mess with that — +1 / +3 / +4 is fine, as is +2 / +3 / +3, etc.

There is also an initiative modifier. This is usually between +1 and +4, and is really just an indicator of how fast the character is. This is used when the DM needs to figure out who goes first. A common use in Deathfest is when multiple characters want to loot a body for their equipment (see below) — the DM calls for an initiative check and whoever rolls highest gets the loot.

Finally, all characters have two attacks. These are distinct from the abilities, although most abilities also do damage. They do not contain much flavor text. One is a melee attack you can only use up close, and one is a ranged attack you can use from afar. These attacks should definitely be appropriate for the character and should preferably be silly. These could be “Knife to meet you” for a Cutco salesman, or “Combat Scone” for a violent baker, for example.

Each attack has a modifier — when you attack with this attack, this is the modifier you add to the roll to hit your target. Usually one of these is +2 and the other one is +4. You can bend this a little — +1 and +5 would be ok sometimes.

Each attack also does damage. The attack with the higher modifier should do less damage because otherwise players will just use that attack every time — the easier it is to hit, the less damage should result, as a rule of thumb. Damage is defined by damage dice. This can be kind of whatever you want, as long as the damage isn’t so high it would kill a character in one shot (it should be very unlikely or impossible to deal 20+ damage). Here are some examples — 1d10 (roll one 10-sided dice, that’s the damage you did), 2d6+1 (roll two six-sided dice, add them together, and add one,

that's the damage you did), 2d8, 3d4+1, 1d8+2, 2d10, etc.

Attacks also have a critical range and modifier. This is really a legacy feature from D&D but it does make strange things happen sometimes so it's probably worth keeping. In every case it should basically say "if your die shows this (20) multiply by this! (x2)" This means if a character rolls a 20 on the die (without modifiers) when making an attack, they automatically hit and they deal twice the damage they would otherwise. If you really want to, you can make the threat range 19-20 on a few attacks, but you really should keep this rare.

All characters are "Level 5". This means nothing.

**Hit Points** – These are a measure of how healthy and alive a character is. When a character has zero (or negative) hit points, that character is dead.

Most characters start with between 18 and 22 hit points. Especially squishy characters might start out with fewer, especially tough characters with more. Most of the time, however, keep it close to 20 HP. We don't want huge differences between how long different characters live, so these small differences are more of a way to communicate how tough the character is overall. If you do make a character have very few HP, they need to have some sort of ability to make up for it. If you give them a ton of HP, you should give them some major weaknesses.

**AC** – This stands for "Armor Class" and is a measure of how hard a character is to hit in combat. If you try to smack them with a 2x4 or shoot them with an ink gun, how likely are you to succeed? In game terms, this is the DC you need to roll with an attack. If you roll equal to or above someone's AC, you hit them and deal damage, if not, you miss.

Most of the time, ACs should range from 12 (easy to hit) to 16 (hard to hit). "AC" is another legacy term — you can think of all kinds of reasons a character might be tough to hit besides armor. They might be small, agile, much further away than they appear, etc.

But realistically the main rule is that characters with high hit points should have low ACs and vice-versa. Someone very tough shouldn't be too hard to hit, and someone hard to hit shouldn't be too tough. If you give a character lots of HP and a high AC, you better give them some big weaknesses. If you give them very little HP and a low AC, they had better have other great ways to defend themselves.

No matter how many hours you spend building a character, it ultimately belongs to the player, who will find and invent ways to surprise you. You might imagine a Suffragette character you create using her 'fists of justice' attack and her +3 wisdom to be a paragon of good deeds, but maybe this player turns her into a bank robber. Work with, not against, your players' interpretations — the stat block is a guide, not a law.

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In addition to their boring number-filled stats, characters also get a number of zany, exciting abilities. Every character should get 3-5 abilities. These come in a number of flavors. Usually each character gets one passive or flavor ability, a couple X per Tier abilities, and one Once per Deathfest ability, though you can mix it up a little.

### Passive/Flavor Abilities

These are a great place to put the "hook" described above. Deathfest is after all a roleplaying tournament, and while





*Deathfest Spring 2010*



*Deathfest Fall 2010*



*Deathfest Spring 2012, including your authors:  
standing pensive far left, glasses second from right,  
bewildered far right*



Deathfest T-shirts

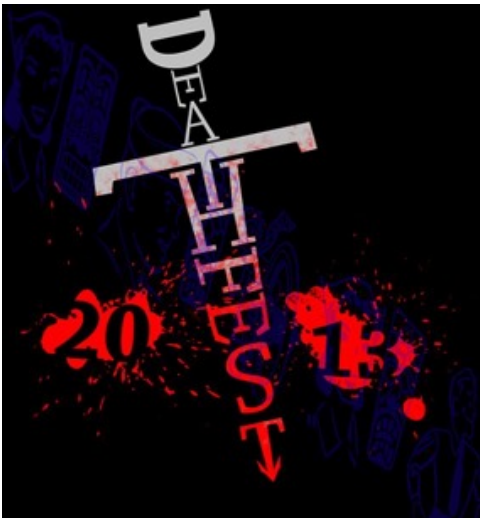


Zach Clemente  
@clementeworks

Ethan and FST yeah-ing and drinking coffee in unison.  
Killing it. #Deathfest

10:22 PM · Apr 6, 2013 · Twitter for Android

A Deathfest Tweet



Tier I list for Spring 2011



Tim Carroll as The King of Spain,  
Deathfest winner fall 2012

The Omen - Volume 56, Issue 1

DEATHFEST  
RETURNS

MARCH 26  
1:00PM

Join us, and DIE:)

20



A Poster??



we don't want to force our players to roleplay in a particular way, we do want to encourage it. The good news is that most players do not need much convincing, just a nudge in the right direction.

The “Cannibal Princess” character Ethan once introduced, for example, had a passive ability called “Pretty Pretty Princess”, which read “Gain a +1 to Charisma as long as you act with proper courtly etiquette.” A +1 to Charisma is not much of a bonus, but it encourages the player to play the character in a certain way, and gives them a small reward for doing so. If they decide to play the Cannibal Princess in a different direction, though, they're free to do so.

Passive abilities can also influence the rest of the Tier. For example, a drinking-game-themed character might have a passive ability called “Taboo”, where they can choose a word that is tabooed for the Tier, and if anyone says that word, they take 1 point of damage. As mentioned above, abilities that affect so many people and have out-of-game requirements (speaking in a certain way) should be used cautiously.

These abilities can even be negative, either to encourage a player to not act in a certain way, or as a gag. One time Ethan made a character named “Stark Tony, the Man Iron”, a robot wrapped in a flesh suit. Because Tony Stark, the Iron Man, loves alcohol, I made Stark Tony hate it, and gave him a passive ability that made him take 1d4 damage whenever he drank or even touched alcohol. I intended this as a gag, but when we got to my diner-themed Tier II, the player who got Stark Tony forgot about this ability, ordered a whiskey, drank it, took 1d4 damage, and died.

Finally, these can just be for flavor, or just be jokes. One character had an ability that was simply, “you are exceptionally talented at seeing eagles”. Players will usually find a way to make these things count.

### X per Tier

X per Tier (sometimes x/tier) abilities are abilities that you can use a certain number of times per Tier — for example, a 1/tier ability can be used once per tier, a 2/tier ability can be used twice per tier, and so on. The number of uses should be related to how powerful the ability is. A 1/tier ability can only be used a maximum of three times in that Deathfest, so it should be pretty powerful. A 3/tier ability can be used a lot, and shouldn't be too strong or too wild.

Most characters will only get 3 or 4 turns in a given tier. If they die early on, they will probably get fewer. Therefore we recommend that you not give more than three uses of an ability per tier, i.e. no 4/tier or 5/tier or higher.

The standard is one weaker 3/tier ability and one stronger 1/tier ability, or two decent 2/tier abilities, but feel free to bend this one.

If the passive abilities are the hook for a character, these are the bread and butter. Whatever the character does needs to be represented in these abilities. If the character is a cook, they need to have abilities that let them cook. If they are a firefighter, they need to have firefighter abilities. If they are a man trapped inside a vending machine, they need to be able to make change and vend things.

These need to be abilities that the player WANTS TO USE. For a player to want to use an ability, they need to have a sense of what will happen when they use the ability. While a random element can be fun, abilities that are really random take away the sense of agency. “Use this ability and the DM will give you a surprise!” is not a good ability. The ability also needs to be likely to benefit them. If you give a character an ability that hurts them, they probably won't use it.

They also need to be abilities that the player is likely to be ABLE TO USE. Having an ability that activates on a trigger (when you take damage, when you make a check to escape something, etc.) is a great idea, but if the triggers are too specific, they may never get a chance to use the ability. Don't give a character an ability that turns mushrooms into people unless you are certain they will encounter lots of mushrooms. Don't give a character an ability that they can only use when someone else gets married, unless you are running a marriage-themed Deathfest. You have to be extra careful of this. Your Tier I and Tier II may be filled with mushrooms, but if the character gets tierported or goes to a deadgame, there's no guarantee that there will be any mushrooms there! Most of the time, triggers should be very broad.

That said, there are ways to make weird triggers engaging. Giving a corporate executive character an ability that says, "3/tier: When someone gives you a handshake, deal 1d6 damage to them and take all of their items" is a great idea. They may never get to use the ability, but they will get to go around and be like, "who wants a nice firm handshake?" or "that sounds like a great plan, let's shake on it." Probably no one falls for it, but if they do, so much the better.

Also be careful of abilities that force other players to do things. Do not give players mind-control abilities, hypnosis abilities, puppeteer abilities, etc. An ability like "forces target player to drop what they are holding" is ok because it only controls one action, and "convinces target player to be friendly towards you" is ok because it doesn't force the player to behave in any specific way, just to be friendly in general. Don't go much further than that.

## Once per Deathfest

A Once per Deathfest ability is exactly what it sounds like — an ability a character can use exactly once per Deathfest. This is their masterpiece; it is the highest expression of whatever nonsense bullshit theme you based the character on. Every character has one, and each one should be different. But they need to be fun, be interesting, and most importantly, they need to make a big impact on the game. This is the character's chance to shine.

When they die, characters will often try to use their Once per Deathfest, and you should usually let them do it. So when you're designing these abilities, it's good to keep this in mind, and design abilities that would work well as grand exits if the character chooses to use it in this way. The Once per Deathfest can also sometimes be a 'Hail Mary' play to avoid death. Keeping this in mind, however, make sure you give them an ability they can also use even if they're not about to die.

The base bog-standard default Once per Deathfest ability is, "Your character does [extreme thing related to their character theme]. Roll a d20 to see what happens." A time travel wizard would summon a random historical figure. A giant fighting robot would use their secret technique. A pair of shoes would begin to emit an unearthly odor. This gives the player some control and lets them be creative with their big action — they can say, I try to summon this kind of historical figure, or I target my secret technique at this monster/character/mountain/God/DM.

But not total control — what happens depends on how well the character rolls. If they roll a low number, something bad happens to them (and everyone else), and they probably die. If they roll a high number, the plan goes off brilliantly and they reshape the course of Deathfest. If they roll a number in the middle, something incredibly chaotic happens. Either way, there is a big impact.

That's an easy way to make Once per Deathfests. We encourage you to be more creative, but this is a good place to start.

We strongly recommend against giving a character two Once per Deathfest abilities. One per character, please.

**FST's note:** As with all rules, feel free to break this one if you think about how it might break the game. To my recollection we've had a couple characters which only had once per Deathfests, but they were proportionately less OP and, critically, proportionately less zany. Honestly, this didn't work very well, but I know if I see a rule I want to break it, so my cautionary note here is to remember that the overall funness of the game is better preserved by letting people do extremely wild stuff sometimes.

### Equipment

Character items were loot drops when the character died. They also provided flavor for the player; pick one or two things that fit the character theme, and don't make them too useful. These are not abilities — they don't let the character do anything special. If you give them a kazoo, it's just a normal kazoo.

We tried doing something interesting with items a couple of times but it never worked out, so probably don't bother. But also, don't get rid of them entirely. Every Deathfest there was someone who came up with something weird they could do with the items they had collected.

### Breaking the Rules

Every character should have at least three abilities. Every character should have a Once per Deathfest ability. Other than that, you can get creative, provided you're keeping an eye on gameplay.

You can break the rules as much as you want, as long as you make sure to give the resulting character to a player who you know can handle it. One time, for example, there was a Cryptographer character. They had very powerful abilities but the name and text of the abilities were literally encrypted, so you couldn't read them. To be able to use the abilities, you actually had to figure out which cypher was used to encrypt each ability and then decrypt it while playing, so you could tell what your abilities were. This would be no fun for most players, but we gave it to one of Hampshire's few math students. He managed to decrypt three of his five abilities before he died, and had a great time doing so.

Another time someone was running a tier where all the characters were different Batmans. You know, Firefighter Batman, Ballet Batman, Dentist Batman, etc. The first time they went to print out these characters, however, they made a mistake with the printing settings and ended up with a document of all 20 Batmans stapled together. Some DM had the bright idea of giving this stack of 20 Batmans to Chris Sommer as his "character", with the restriction that each Batman now had only 1 HP, and Chris was forbidden from winning. Sure enough, Chris had a great time being 20 Batmans, didn't win Deathfest, and it didn't break the game.

### Healing

Deathfest is about dying, and so for the most part, you shouldn't give out very many healing abilities. But healing is a powerful incentive in such a dangerous sport, and so you can include it from time to time.

We would recommend giving healing abilities to no more than one or two characters per tier, and even these abilities



should be pretty weak. For example, a Florist character with a 2/tier ability that creates a flower which heals 1d4 HP when eaten.

Another option is giving abilities that might heal or might damage people. For example, the Demon Nurse character had an ability called “Open Your Food Tract, Mammal” which among other things could be used to heal a character for 1d8-3 HP. If the total of that roll was negative, the target would take damage instead.

## Forbidden Abilities

Traditionally, there were two abilities that were expressly forbidden. Characters are not allowed to fly, and characters are not allowed to teleport. Even if you base a character off of an angel, they should not be able to fly; even if you base a character off of the X-Men’s Nightcrawler, they should not be allowed to teleport. And by no means should you ever give a character an item or ability that explicitly grants teleportation or flight, even temporarily.

The reason for this is simple: characters that can fly or teleport have an easy way to avoid all sorts of obstacles. They can and will skip entire portions of the adventure, and this will lead to things getting very messy very fast. Both abilities seem like they are no big deal, but trust us, this was a tradition for a reason. If you make a character that is a giant bumblebee, you can give them rollerskates if you want, but don’t let them fly.

While letting characters teleport around the world will break your game, letting them teleport between dimensions is pretty ok. We called it...

## Tierporting

Some abilities can allow (or force) characters to get out of Dodge.... Way out of Dodge. Like, across the multiverse. Occasionally, as either an intended effect or a side effect of an ability, a “tierporting” ability will send a player (and their character) from one game to another. These aren’t “auto-advancements” to “skip” tiers. You don’t go from Tier I right to Tier II — instead they send someone from, for example, FST’s after school detention Tier I to Alex V’s gym class Tier I. Usually characters arrive in the same state of health or damage that they left. Occasionally, if funny or useful, they may take other characters with them.

DMs can also tierport characters if they feel it would serve the needs of the game. Sometimes wandering DMs would take on this role during Tier I and Tier II, and do some cross-pollination by abducting characters from one tier and dropping them into a different tier (with permission; don’t abduct someone’s characters without asking!).

## Diseases

Some abilities create lasting effects, often in the form of diseases which modify — for good or ill — affected character’s stats, or which provide side effects that alter the game state through a character’s appearance, actions, etc (growing spots, dancing plagues, etc). You can have fun with these, but keep stat modifications relatively balanced unless the intent is to kill the character.

**FST’s note:** We toned these way down because the AIDS/herpes/STD jokes were not conducive to community

norms, and promoted various “bad” ways of spreading contagion, meaning player actions which impinged on other player’s characters in bad “bad” behaviors rather than “funny” bad behaviors. You’ll want to talk with your fellow DMs about what kind of diseases you do and don’t think are OK to joke about when you get feedback on your character sheets, since your Tier I characters will end up in someone else’s deadgame, Tier III, etc.

**ELP’s note:** I’m torn because on the one hand diseases are a Deathfest tradition, but on the other hand they are almost always a big pain. Deathfest does not need any help spiraling out of control, and introducing abilities with the potential for exponential growth is a risky prospect. You may just want to avoid them altogether. We’re mostly mentioning this here because it’s something new DMs might think up on their own and we want you to be aware of the risks.

## Group Mechanics

Sometimes it is fun to make multiple characters who have existing relationships and/or abilities that interact. You shouldn’t overuse this, but having one or two of these groups can be fun.

Sometimes you will have a group of characters that are thematically related. You might have a group of bakers. You might have the ghosts of several dead prime ministers. You might have twenty Batmans. This can be fun and a good way to put a strong theme or themes in your tier. You can even give these characters abilities that interact.

Sometimes you will have a group that works together. One time there were three pirate characters in a tier — the Pirate Captain, the Pirate Navigator, and the Pirate Gunner. The Captain had abilities that let all three pirates sail the high seas in search of plunder (i.e. tierport between tiers). The Navigator had abilities that let them pick their destination when tierporting, and provided tactical support to the other pirates. The Gunner had big guns.

Sometimes you will have a group of characters that work against each other. One time there were three Scottish Lord characters. All of them had an ability called “King of Scotland” which gave them a bunch of nice bonuses — but only if the other two Scottish Lord characters were dead. This encouraged them to fight one another for the crown, and the rest of their abilities helped them try to take each other out. One had a very aggressive set of combat abilities, one had stealth and magic abilities, and one had abilities that let him resist the abilities of the other two. There was also a “Thespian” character in this Tier with a passive ability that dealt 1d6 damage to anyone who said the name of the Scottish play, just to keep things interesting.

You can also make characters that aren’t part of a group but naturally form groups; like the Narrator character, whose abilities couldn’t help him, but could help (or hinder) other characters by retelling how their story went; or the Virgil character, who had to die in Tier I, go to a deadgame, pick another dead character, and use their abilities to guide both of them out of the underworld.

Don’t overdo this. Having one group of characters with group mechanics in your tier is fun and interesting. Having more than one is probably too much and too complicated. But in general, encouraging your players to interact more is good and interactive abilities are fun.

**FST’s note:** Michaela once designed a tier with entirely interlocking characters, but they were all flexible and optional. Stuff like a “friend” character who gets a small bonus for every “friend” they make, etc. This worked well because it gave players an incentive to invent interactions but it didn’t lock in characters to one group. I did something similar and had a couple of characters with abilities which made them seek out other people, but not a themed group. A

tank, which wanted to find a rider so they could both get bonuses (but the tank got a special bonus if they betrayed the rider). A trophy spouse, who wanted a partner and both partners got to share damage dice (but the trophy spouse got a special bonus ability if their partner died), etc. This generally worked well to make players kill each other and it gave me an easy way to build up a strong play style in the characters' stats and abilities, but if you're doing a more plot-centered plot, it'll probably be a distraction, so use judiciously.

## Running Deathfest

Costumes are *highly* recommended, especially for DMs.

**ELP:** There was always food... but it was bad? I remember a lot of bad sandwiches. Am I wrong?

**FST:** Generally Deathfest food came in one of two forms — Sibies pizza, for GMs, and a whole lot of sandwich fixings, pretzels, chips, and every imaginable form of soda, for attendees (and DMs who run out of pizza). The main purpose of Excalibur was to pay for the snacks.

There was a beer garden in Spring 2009. It may have been Andy Rosequist's fault.

For a while there was a lively tradition of livetweeting Deathfest, much of which was documented in [The Omen](https://tinyurl.com/deathfest2011) (<https://tinyurl.com/deathfest2011>, courtesy of Zachary Clemente). As far as we can tell, this tradition ended with #deathpress in Fall 2013. We strongly recommend you bring this one back.

Deathfest does not “end” “on time”. Aim for a reasonable schedule but be prepared to be up until 3AM killing the last three moon robots who refuse to go quietly.

If you run Deathfest in FPH, it goes something like this: Everyone meets in the main auditorium to get oriented, learn the themes, etc. The Tier I themes are announced and people go sit in a row of the auditorium matched to the Tier I they want. When each Tier has about the same number of people, the Tiers split up and go to classrooms for Tier I. As Tier I ends, people go back to the main hall. There is a brief recap, Tier II locations are announced, and people go to their Tier II or Deadgame. When Tier II ends, everyone comes back to the main auditorium for Tier III, and the game stays there until Deathfest is over.

Preparing for Deathfest usually took us about two months. We set and announced the date about two months out, to my recollection usually November and March. The theme and Tier III were decided, usually by vote, and DMs then picked deadgames or Tier Is. After Tier Is were planned, Tier IIs were decided. Characters were due in phases, mostly just to keep accountability so nobody was setting up 30 characters the night before (it sometimes still happened). We usually had several meetings to workshop characters and provide feedback. New DMs usually ran ‘practice’ tiers with the other DMs as players so they could try out the ropes, and it let the other DMs get a taste of being a player for once.

The other key part of planning ahead is advertising, but this will depend on how many people you hope to get at Deathfest. For a new event, in a moment when the college doesn't have a lot of money, it's hard to say what it should be like — only that you can think about how to get the word out to community members who might be interested, and starting early is better.

The name of the game is Deathfest. Every character but (approximately) one will die that night. Deathfest is only fun and interesting as long as dying stays fun and interesting. Your job as a DM is to make sure that your players 1) die and 2) have fun doing so.

While Tier I and Tier II are running, the Tier III DM(s) and any other free DMs should have something entertaining running in the main hall, to entertain dead players and any spectators. Often we would show a movie or something.

## Dangers of Basic Play

There are a number of things that seem like good ideas in the design stage but can stop your game like an old sock in a coffee grinder. This is where we warn you about these things.

### Foot-High Walls

Sometimes you ask everyone to make an easy check to progress through the tier. This can take many forms. It can be climbing over a foot-high wall. It can be jumping a four-foot gap. It can be eating a very spicy curry to appease the local chef/dictator. It sounds simple, and probably you barely thought about this event when you added it to your tier.

In a d20 system, a check where you have to roll a 10 or higher to succeed (a DC of 10) is considered easy. So a DC of 8 for climbing over that foot-high wall should be super easy, right? Wrong! Assuming no modifiers to their checks, 40% of your players will fail this on their first attempt! Even worse, 16% will fail it twice in a row. About 6% will fail it on their first three tries.

If your luck is bad (and it will be!), you will end up with a couple of players who fail to climb over that wall five or six times in a row. This is no fun for them, because they are a dragon lord or elder god who has repeatedly failed to climb a fence, and are getting singled out for it. This is no fun for other players, because they are stuck waiting for the others to make it past this “minor” obstacle. And it is no fun for you, the DM. Don’t put mandatory obstacle checks in your tier, even easy ones.

### “Roll to Avoid Damage”

A lazy DM can announce something like, “A red sports car has just done a flip off of the yacht and crashed into the swimming pool filled with mega-uranium. Everyone make a reflex save to avoid taking damage.” If you do this enough times, you will kill off half of your players and be ready to move on to the next tier. However, this is an extremely lazy excuse for running an adventure, and I cannot stress this enough, unbelievably boring for your players.

The reason this is boring is that it makes it so that players’ choices don’t matter. Sitting around and taking damage randomly is not fun. Being creative with your choices, taking risks in the face of danger, and dealing with the consequences is fun.

Some forms of global damage can be ok. “Everyone who doesn’t get out of the beer vats will have to make a save

or take damage, as the beer turns to acid” is good because it encourages players to find a way to get out of the beer vats, and presumably on to the next part of the adventure. “Anyone who doesn’t find a buddy by next turn will have to make a reflex save or get attacked by a shark” is good because it encourages consequential interaction between the players. But we don’t think there’s ever a good time for the DM to hand out damage purely on the basis of a global dice roll.

It is ok to give players “everyone in the tier must roll to avoid damage” abilities, particularly as their Once per Deathfest, since in this case it is a player’s action causing the event, which increases their agency and makes it meaningful — “Charles dropped a nuke on Candyland and I died” is fun. Even so, these can get tired pretty fast, so don’t include too many.

**FST’s quibble:** I actually loved to do splash damage but only in tiny increments (maybe one point of damage) and as kind of a flavor text. Nothing sets the scene (and gets people involved on their off-turn) like flavor damage from environmental hazards and/or other player’s choices. I found it helped set people up to fight each other, which was one of my favorite strategies to up the tier kill count without seeming capricious. Occasionally someone down to their last HP would die as a result of flavor damage, though, so this did backfire. Use your best discretion as you balance making every kill count and the need to keep the game going, which means whittling down HP sometimes. I agree that giving players an incentive to problem solve is a better way than ‘rocks fall everybody dies’.

## Tier I

Running Tier I is the basis of running Deathfest. Most of what applies in Tier I also applies to Tier II, and somewhat to Tier III.

The basic structure of Tier I goes like this: The characters start off in a dangerous situation. Sometimes they face the same dangerous situation for the whole tier. Sometimes they progress through a series of encounters.

Whenever an encounter begins, the DM has everyone roll an initiative check. Whoever rolls highest goes first and can do one action (attack someone, go somewhere and pull a lever, use an ability, etc.). If you want the game to run smoothly, encourage players to keep their actions snappy and decisive. They say what they do, you tell them what to roll, they roll some dice, you tell them what happens.

Then on to the next character. Instead of keeping track of initiative with 20+ players, just go around clockwise (or if you must, widdershins) in a circle.

For a tier to be any fun, every character must get at least one turn before dying. A good tier will go around the table three or four times, so everyone who survives gets several turns, and really, the more the better.

There are a few big mistakes that are easy to make:

DO NOT give out damage randomly (see above). If people die randomly, then their actions don’t matter, and there’s no reason for them to engage. This is boring.

DO NOT punish players simply for taking actions. If everyone who does anything takes damage, people will learn to do nothing. This is boring.



DO allow players to experience the consequences of their own actions.

Generally, allowing characters to “succeed” at doing something they want to do, and to have an impact on the play state, but taking damage anyway, does allow them to feel engaged and rewarded for taking action but still die.

**(FST’s note:** I liked to make characters perform wisdom or knowledge checks when they attempted to perform physical challenges, and then administer unexpected consequences for success. Want to knock down a door? No problem! You are going to go right through that door — but if you didn’t make your wisdom check, you might come away with a full-body splinter problem. Want to try to drop-kick the sun? Sure, make a knowledge check. Oh, you didn’t account for gravity? Well, you and the sun are hurtling opposite directions at millions of billions of miles an hour. It’s getting colder, but the stars are so bright. Thank you for playing Deathfest. Letting people do what they want, but punishing them with their own success, can be a successful angle. You’ll have to find your own playstyle — perhaps you rely on inter-player combat for damage, or have players’ actions affect others through ‘splash damage.’ Maybe you just want your team to fight a really big monster! It’s up to you how you structure your tier and how you assign damage, but remember that encouraging people to play big, and play to their characters’ want, usually makes a more fun game than players only trying to outthink the GM and not take any damage.)

By the end of Tier I, about half of your characters should be dead. Those who survive move on to Tier II. Those who die can join a dead game, go home, or stick around as spectators for Tier III.

### Tier II

Tier II is traditionally co-run, with two DMs merging the survivors from their respective Tier I’s into a single group. The Tier II may thematically resonate with both Tier I’s, but it also needs to start to move your players into the Tier III, so it can help to have it connect to the main “plot” (i.e., mole people).

The exact structure of Tier II partnerships is up to DMs, and Tier II partners should discuss and get on the same page about how they would like to co-DM. This could look a lot of ways — taking turns, each running one “round” or encounter, each playing an “NPC” the players must fight while the other DM handles damage distro, etc. It depends on what makes each DM comfortable.

Otherwise, this is pretty much the same as a Tier I. Most of your characters should die. Those that survive go on to Tier III. The goal is to have about 20-30 players in Tier III, so if there are 5 Tier II’s, that means 4-5 survivors from each. Those who die are dead forever, but many will stick around to watch Tier III, and of course they may want to see if they won fabulous prizes (see below).

### Deadgames

When a player dies in Tier I, they can go to a deadgame. This is a special kind of Tier II game for dead players only. Each player returns with, traditionally, half their HP — although, again, as long as you think about how you will modify your play so you get the outcome you want, you can mess around with this rule. The goal is to kill a lot of people in a short tier, but to keep it player-centered, rather than a DM caprice.

Dead games are an opportunity for characters to return to life and have a shot at eternal glory. In dead games, dead

players die again, but the one player (or MAYBE two players) that survives the dead game returns to life and goes on to Tier III.

To make this work, dead games have to be much more punishing than normal tiers. If you are DMing a dead game, you need to make sure that only one or two players are alive at the end of the dead game to go on to Tier III.

## Tier III

Tier III is the culmination of all the deaths before, and also what brings your Deathfest Plot together. Tier III is also the tier with the largest audience:players ratio, so it's the most like a show.

This show is traditionally headed by one or two Tier III DMs, whose role is to embody the theme, orchestrate the plot, and run Tier III. Often the Tier III DMs will invite other DMs back to run sections of the tier, or to play NPCs — this is when folks let their inner theater kid out. You can do whatever you want with this, but that's usually how we did it.

Sometimes, your Tier III DMs create NPC characters to be the sort of 'big bad' — this was an informal tradition, but it helped add dramatic tension. For example, in the Business Tier III Ethan and FST were two CEOs, and the lowly employees had to defeat the CEOs and their minions to win/survive/get the job. We had student loans on our minds.

Usually Tier III starts with a scene-painting heavy explanation of the situation, and then continues as "normal." However, pace of play and scale in Tier III are faster and messier usually — people have been saving their once per Deathfests, or have been adding character details and explanations through Tiers I and II, and will have a clearer idea of how they want to play and what they want to do.

Usually, the Tier III DMs also go bigger here — more damage, faster, and distributed more widely. However, you want to balance this with making every Tier III death count.

By Tier III, people know what Deathfest's deal is, so you just have to play big and fast and keep the energy up. While it feels "more important," most people don't actually get to play Tier III, and many people go to bed earlier than that. Most people will play Tier I only. So just have fun playing and know that it just needs to be a fun, theatrical, event and game.

Keep going until there is no one left to die. Deathfest goes to the last player(s) standing.

## Deathfest Awards

Usually one person wins Deathfest, though there have been some exceptions. In 2010, Madeline Hahn commented "two #deathfest winners? blasphemy!" when the two players playing as "Mastodon'r [sic] rhythm section" jointly won Deathfest "for bringing down a death god with a fraternity." This contradicts the official account which says that one winner was Tim Carroll as the Mastodon drummer and the other winner was Aleksi Ahonen (from Finland) as Duffman.

**FST's quibble:** Knowing Deathfest, Duffman may have joined Mastodon.

**ELP's addendum:** Tim says that Aleksí showed up in a Duffman costume and played the Mastodon bassist character with a Duffman voice.

The only person who has ever won Deathfest twice is Tim Carroll. If you revive Deathfest, please let Tim go for the [hat trick](#).

You may be surprised to learn there were Deathfest awards, with actual prizes. Because of FiCom rules, “prizes” had to be \$1, and were generally from the dollar store. A special trip was made just before Deathfest to collect the weirdest \$1 items.

Sometimes awards are added, or retired. If something really really cool happens, and it doesn't fit into one of the existing awards, you can make up a new award for it. The awards are an opportunity for DMs to storytell about cool things that happen in their tier — and they reward players for making big, fun choices.

[One record](#) puts the awards in Spring 2009 as “the Survivor, the Leader, the Jester, the Genocidal Maniac, the Morality Needs to be Checked, the First Guy to Die, the Banner Designer, the Ultimate Badass, the Idiot Who Makes the Same Mistakes, MacGyver and so on.” I think we retired most of these awards soon after, since the list was too long.

In our opinion, these are the canonical awards:

**Creative Morality Award** — This award was established during the first-ever Deathfest. It goes to a character who is “creative” in their application of “morality”.

**Permanent Resident Award** — Inevitably at least one character, instead of dying, is exiled between planes, trapped under a bus, gets lost in the hallway, marries an orc and settles down mid-tier II to run for mayor of Orcsville, enters a PhD program or otherwise is condemned to purgatory, etc. This character is recognized as that year's permanent resident. If more than one character is permanent resided, go with the story that is funnier or the character who is more permanently resided.

**Gary Gygax Award** — Goes to the first player to die. Keep track of when the earliest deaths happen so you know who wins this award.

**Chris Sommer Award for Voice Acting** — Chris Sommer is an alum known for his consummate and dedicated voice acting at Deathfest. In Fall 2010, Shannon Barnesley won the first ever Chris Sommer Award for Voice Acting, “for being a badass Scotsman.”

**Ultimate Badass Award** — Being “super badass” was funnier in 2013, but ridiculous action movies are still pretty funny. If a character does something straight out of a cheesy action movie, they're eligible.

**Leadership Award** — Good leader, bad leader, if you got other people to do something, especially something big, you're eligible.

There was also an actually good prize for the main winner(s). Traditionally the winner was given a set of RPG dice, plus some sort of prize related to the theme. When Maggie Karlin won Deathfest in Spring 2013 (and assumed the title of CEO as a horde of dead animals), we gave her a brown tie that said “Number One” on it in several different

languages. In Spring 2010, the color red won a bucket of cookies. When Tim Carroll won as [The King of Spain](#), Alex V. gave him a stick.

In addition, there were small “tier prizes”, one given by each DM to a player they had seen do something cool; generally the best story from your tier or the player who did the most to make your game fun.

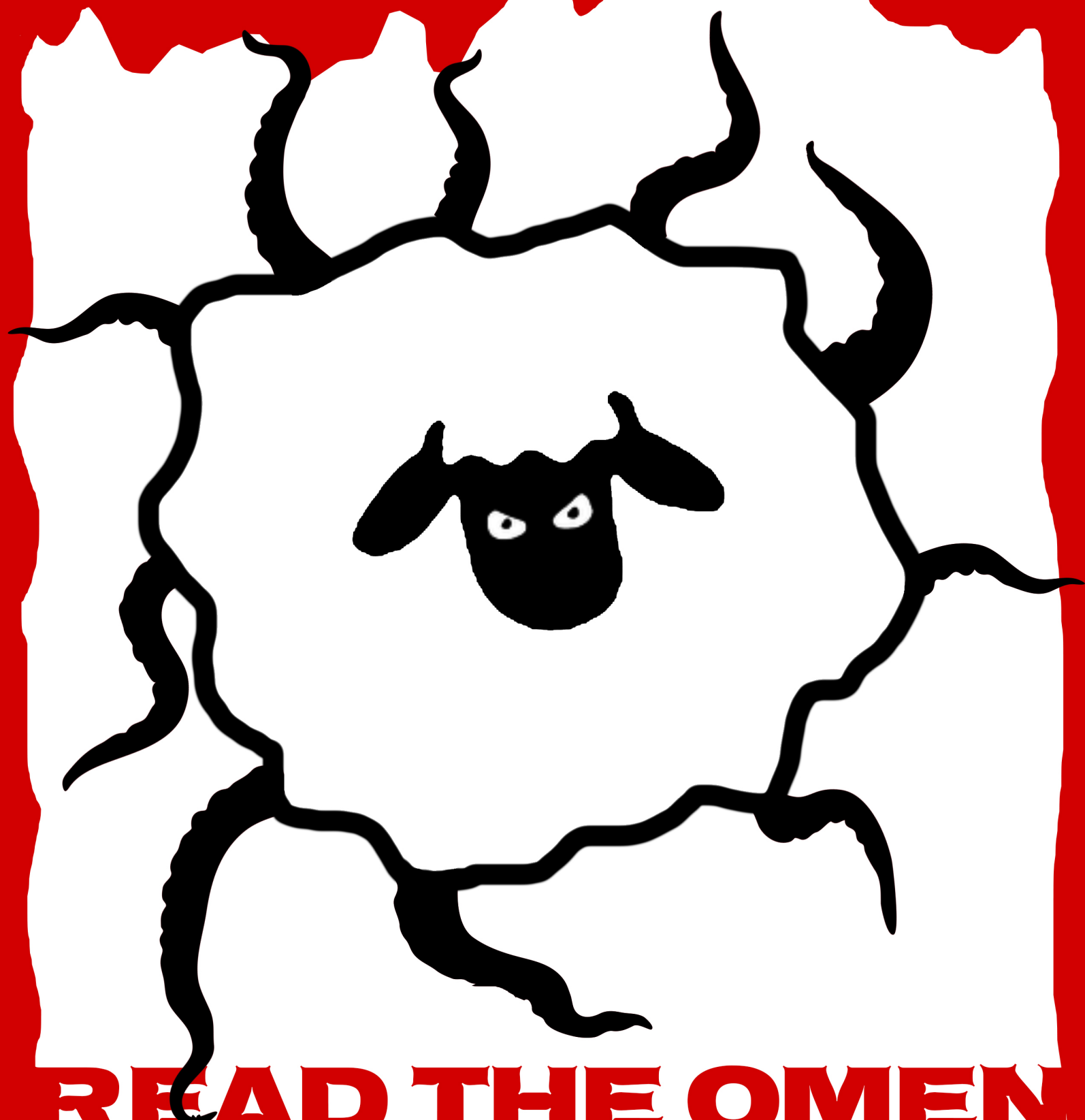
Once you give out the awards, it’s over! Go to bed!!!

## Miscellaneous:

Garamond is the official font of Deathfest. Don’t eat bridge sushi the night before Deathfest. Matt the Barber was Deathfest’s greatest fan, and once hired us to put on a Deathfest for his birthday party. There are differences of opinion about DMs cheating. Sometimes, if you want to kill someone, it’s funny to roll a handful of dice all at once. If you overuse this trick, it loses value. We used to write each other community service letters for running Deathfest. Special thanks to our sources who helped us remember some of the details of this bullshit: Maggie Karlin, Grace Rosen, Ian Campbell, Zach Clemente, Tim Carroll, Pat Skarupa, Erin Snyder, Bera Dunau, Evan Silberman, and Lauren Frasier

## APPENDIX I: DEATHFEST RECORDS

Year	OMEN	Theme	Tier III DM(s)	Deathfest Winner(s)
Spring 2008				
Fall 2008		Game Show called “You Fucking Die”	Mike Rozycki	
Spring 2009				
Fall 2009			Bera Dunau?	Lauren Frasier as Dr. Frank-N-Furter
Spring 2010	<a href="#">Vol 34, #5</a>	<a href="#">Order vs. Chaos</a>	Bera Dunau & Niall Sullivan	Stefan Terry as The Color Red
Fall 2010	<a href="#">Vol 35, #5</a>	The Magic School Bus	Evan Silberman	Aleksi Ahonen as Duffman & Tim Carroll as the drummer from <a href="#">Mastodon</a>
Spring 2011	<a href="#">Vol 36, #4</a>	Mafia	Ian Campbell	Pat Skarupa as “Angry Bartender/ Shizuo from Durarara”
Fall 2011	<a href="#">Vol 37, #5</a>	Lucha	Kenyatta McKenzie	??? but honorable mention to Will Coon as Franz Ferdinand for killing a DM
Spring 2012	<a href="#">Vol 38, #4</a>	<a href="#">The Lost Room</a> + Oregon Trail	Ian Campbell & David Warshow	Panda as some pokémon, possible “Robot Dragonite Unicorn”
Fall 2012	<a href="#">Vol 39, #6</a>	Apocalypse Deathfest	Alex Vercoutere	Tim Carroll as <a href="#">The King of Spain</a>
Spring 2013		BUSINESS	FST & Ethan Ludwin-Peery	Maggie Karlin as <a href="#">“a herd of undead farm animals”</a>
Fall 2013	<a href="#">Vol 41, #5</a>	Prom	Alex Vercoutere	
Spring 2014		Racecars	Keenan	
Fall 2014	<a href="#">Vol 43, #5</a>	Ghosts?		??? as “Skeleton Cheerleader”
Spring 2015				
Fall 2015		Reality TV?		
Spring 2016				
Fall 2016				
Spring 2017				
Fall 2017				



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